

Word, Image, Territory:

Robert Szczerbowski Speaks



Piotr Marecki

korporacja ha!art

We are living in times which, on the one hand, give us a sense of decline, of massive breakthrough and reevaluation, and on the other hand, we see the beginning of an utterly new chapter in the development of civilization, the results of which remain to be seen. This can sometimes give us concern for the future of humanist values.



Robert Szczerbowski

2013



P.: It's 2013. You've decided to publish your *Anthology*, which contains three of your works published as books and a corrected hypertext version of an untitled book. Your last ventures into this medium were in the early 1990s. Then you declared that you would become a writer who didn't use language, and from then on you consistently abandoned the book form. How did you make the decision to publish all of it together after such a long pause?

R.: The fact that I abandoned writing does not mean that I renounced it. Books were an important link in my creative work, they were where it all began. To a large extent they determined what I went on to do. In a more or less natural way I drew from them in all my later work. When they first appeared in print, they did not go into "circulation," they only existed in very closed circles. This was surely because of the poor distribution, the lack of promotion, but

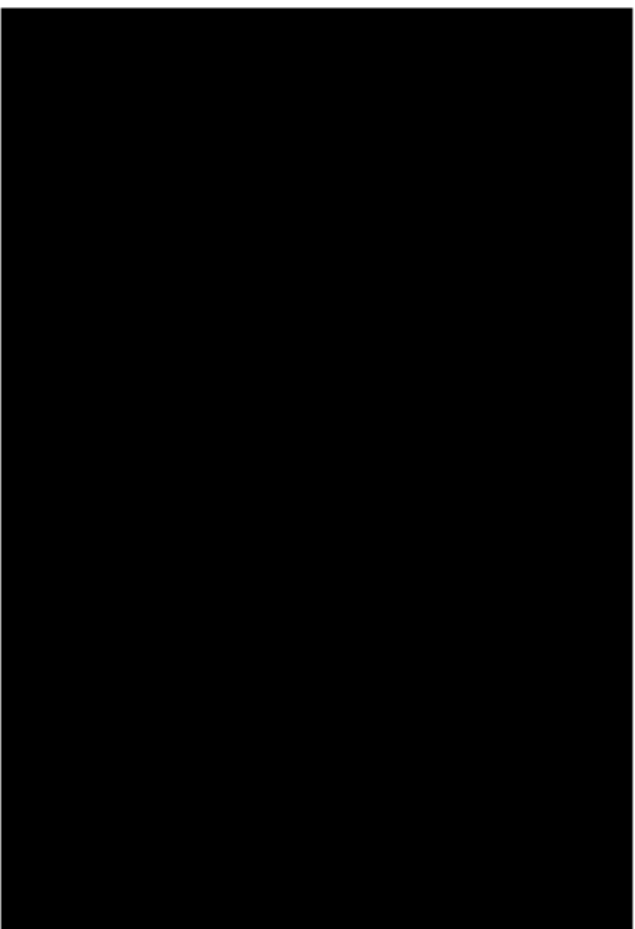
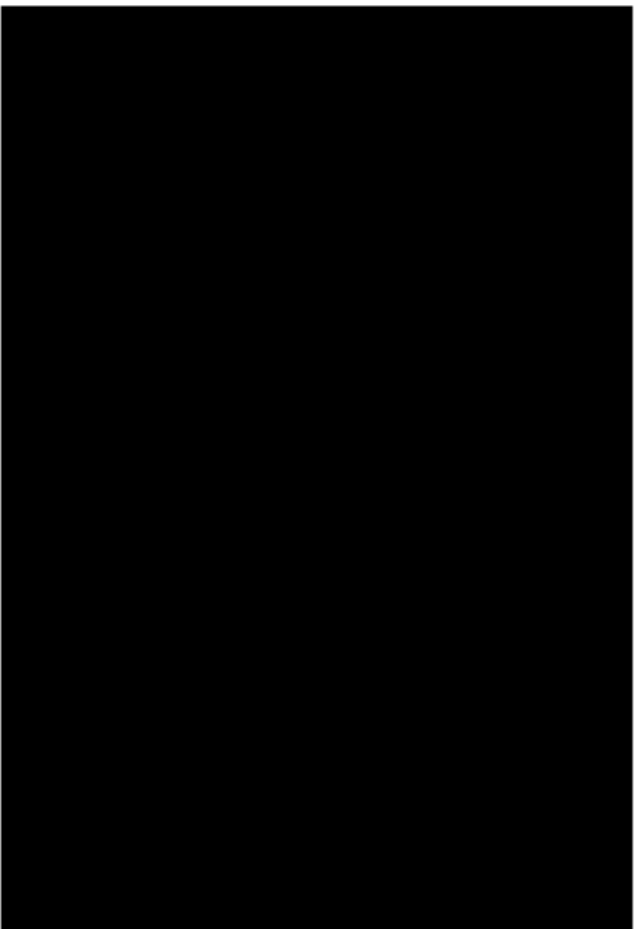
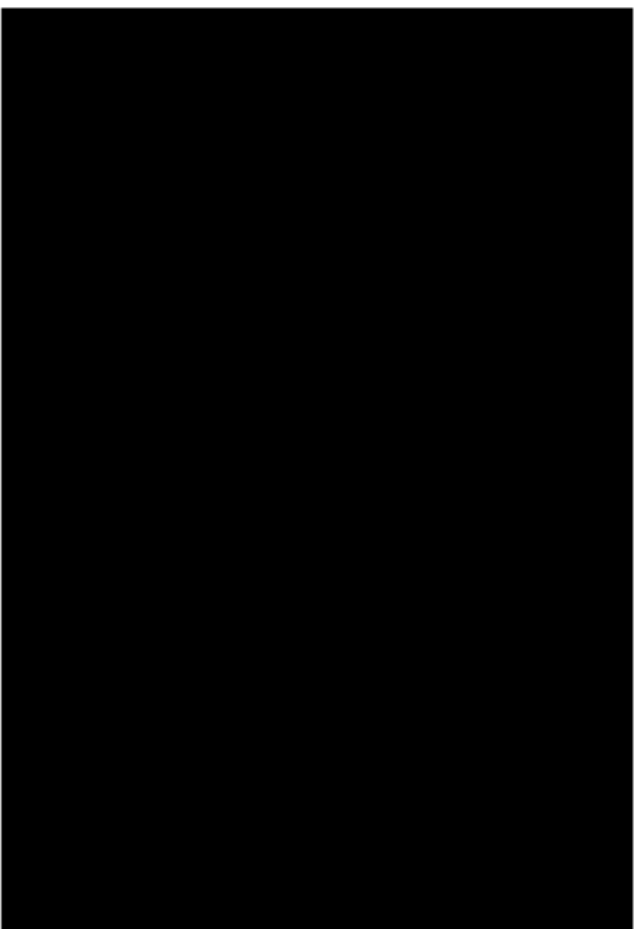
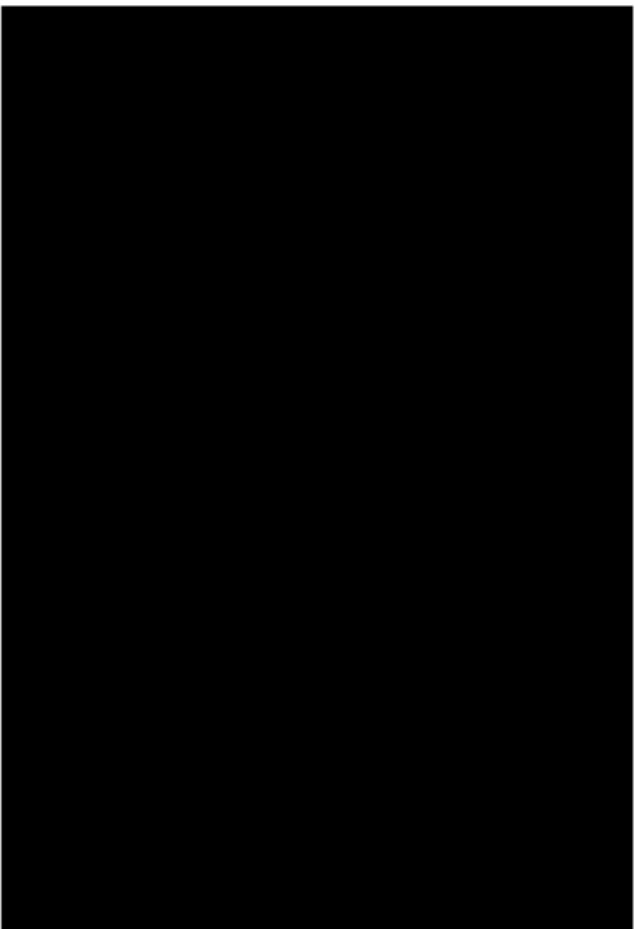
also because it was less than clear what to do with them. Moreover, the climate was all wrong for the reception of this kind of work – the early period of social and political transformations in Poland kept minds busy with everyday life. It has only been over the past few years that interest in those works came about, and so it is good to be able to bring them back in a new guise. And because they could be published together, their sequence and mutual references became more clear.

P.: Your comeback in literature was in the air in 2013. On the one hand, you managed to convince the editors of the Liberatura Series to prepare *All the Ends of the World* for the radical fortieth issue of Ha!art, and you put a great deal of energy into correcting the books that went into your *Anthology*. That was no ordinary re-edition - you made changes to all the publications.

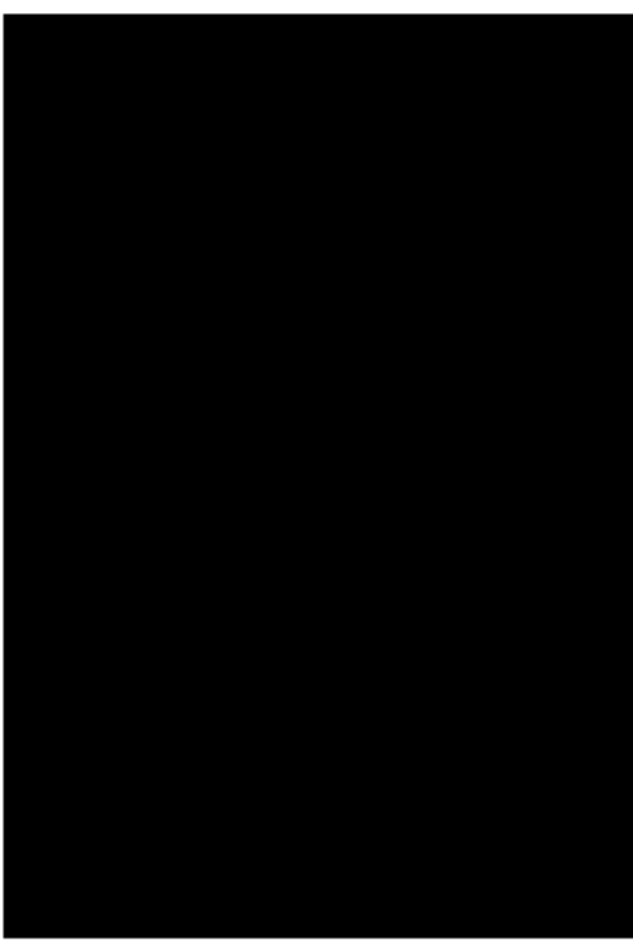
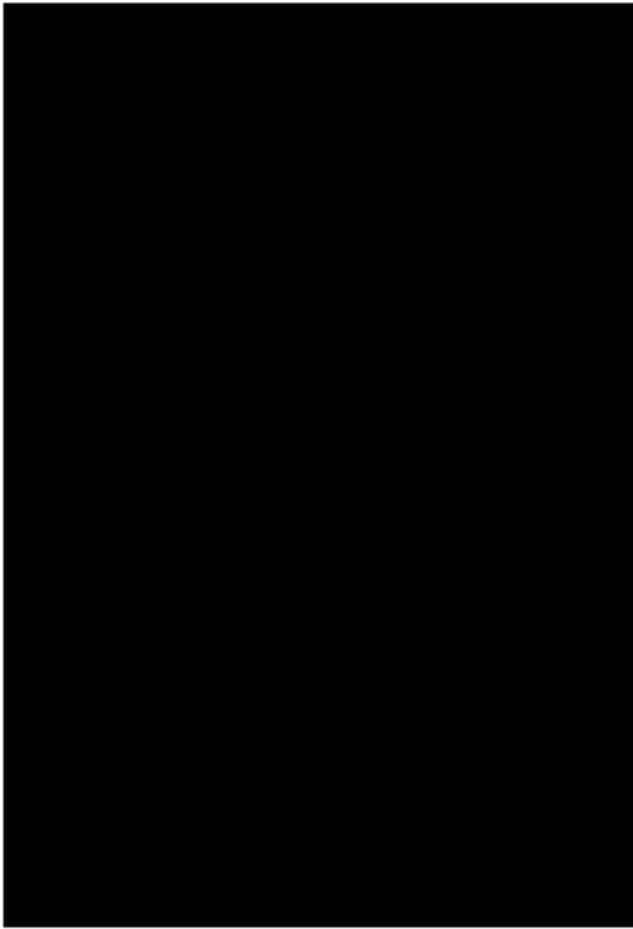
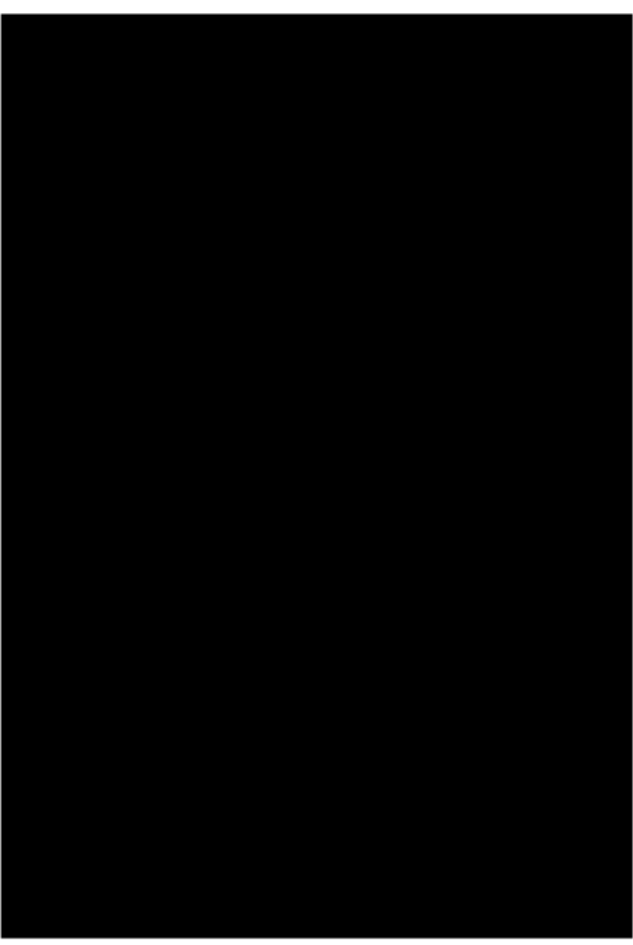
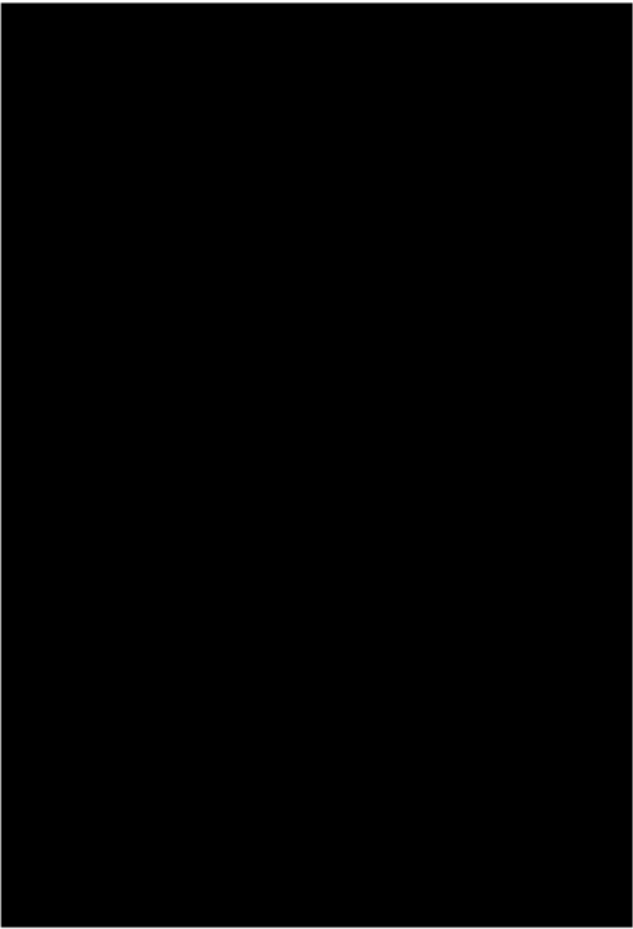
R.: As long as they were being republished, it stood to reason that they should be reviewed after the over twenty years that had passed, and do corrections, insofar as that was possible. The best phrase would be: to bring them up to date. After so much time one reads one's own work like they were written by some other man, one has more distance and becomes more critical.

For a long time I had been ill-disposed to my books. I

All the Ends of the World



All the Ends of the World



used various tactics to try and break them apart, to openly abandon or transcend them. This was tied to my transition to extra-linguistic work, but after a few years, just when I had decided to transfer the last of them to an electronic form, I wrote the preface to *The Book of a Life*. Perhaps I understood that the book was, to a great degree, a riddle, that it needed an introduction, like *Prologue*. Only now, in the new edition, was there the chance to join it with the publication and make it an integral part of the text.

In terms of the radical issue, I think I was invited to contribute because of the short-term prospect of publishing the *Anthology*. I acceded to this all the more eagerly, as *All the Ends of the World* is like the icing on the cake in my abandonment of writing; after all, I use no language there at all. It is only a title, there is no text, or perhaps there is, you just can't see it, because the pages are totally black...

P.: There are digits.

R.: But digits are not part of language... They are only used to number the pages, though they do not stick to numerical order...

P.: I read an interview you gave Małgorzata Dawidek-Gryglicka a few years back. When there was talk of liberature, you kept your distance...

R.: I have always feared being pigeonholed. Some time ago, however, I read Zenon Fajfer's collection of texts about liberature. Then I realized that, out of his ten conditions for this kind of work, my writing fulfilled at least nine. This concerns *The Book of a Life* and, in particular, the untitled book, which is a model example of liberature as Fajfer defines it. There was definitely a similar thinking and sensitivity at work.

P.: After meeting in Krakow during Ha!vant-garde in October 2013, there were repeated attempts to define *Æ* as a "hybrid book," a "textual hybrid," "something beyond a book," or as "post-literature." Can we, in our day, simply use the tools provided by the theorists of liberature and avoid genre classifications?

R.: At least now it is more or less clear what we're dealing with... More or less. This sort of structuring can elucidate things, but I hope it doesn't shut up my works in those boxes, that they are something more. All this more concerns the position toward the work created in the language. If a genre classification is absolutely necessary, the concept of liberature is broad enough and leaves such a margin of freedom for the artist that it in no way determines the work; on the contrary, it indicates its extended possibilities. That's how it was with all the historical texts you publish



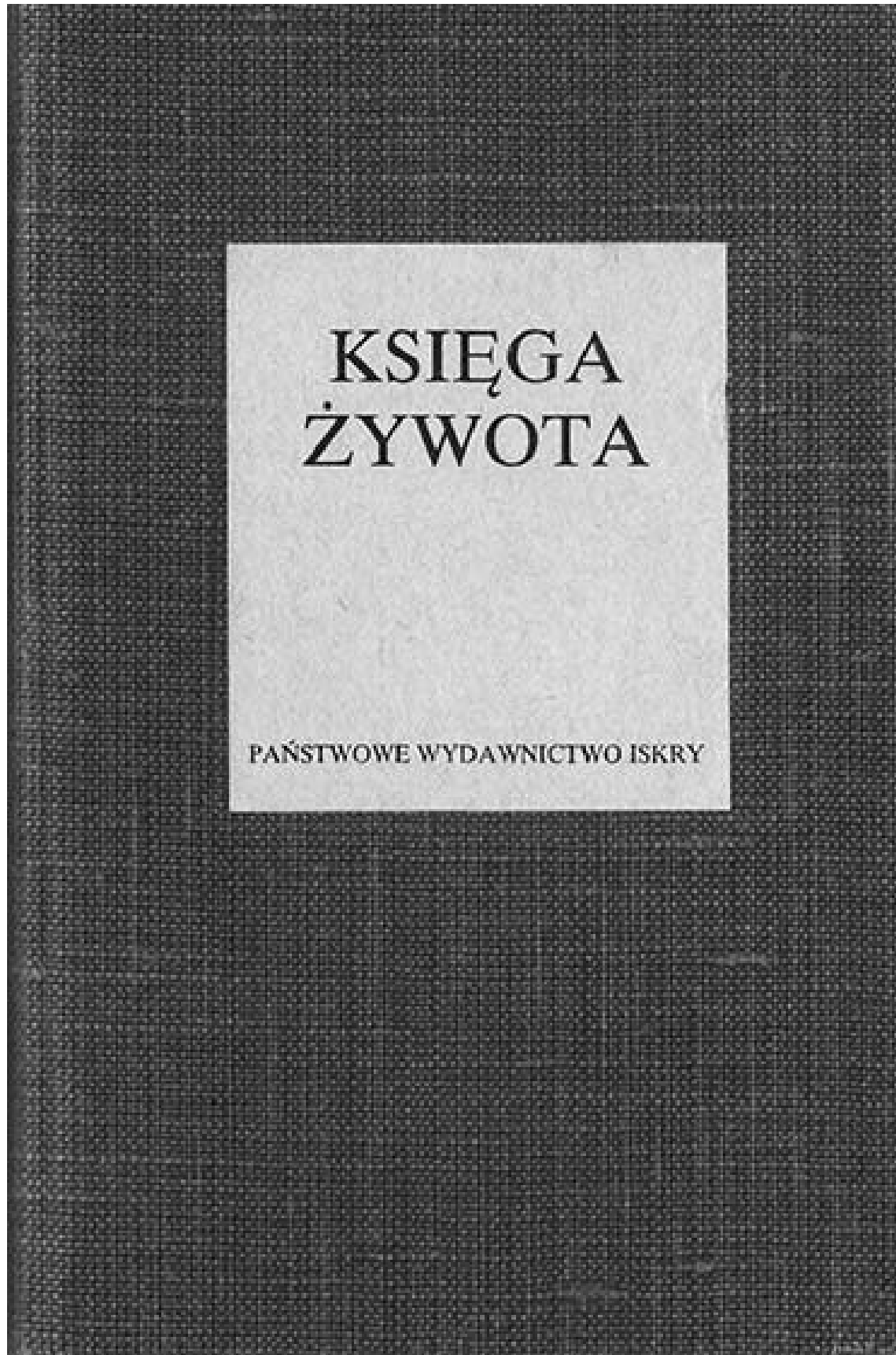
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The Book of a Life

in this series, whose originals sometimes were made long ago, such as Mallarme, Joyce etc. – for those authors it wasn't liberature, it was a certain mode of thinking and writing that went beyond language itself, and verbal communication as such. *Life – A User's Manual*, for example, might be classified as liberature, but it is something more.

P.: Liberature is focused on the physical aspect of the book. On the one hand, you are a writer who has abandoned this aspect; on the other, when you were still using the book form you approached the limits of the material...

R.: Because I was always interested in the corporeality of the book, I ultimately had to also take an interest in its incorporeality, and for the same reason: I was thinking about how the text could exist. I try to emphasize the fact, in all my works, that I was coming from a literary standpoint, I was referencing the history of literature, and what I myself took from literature, how it interested me, and in particular its transformations... And this evolutionary thinking bore fruit in such-and-such books. Then, for the same reasons, I gave up on books.

P.: Was this an aesthetic development?

R.: In the general sense of the evolution of form, and on a deeper level, in terms of how my thinking about the medium of writing changed, of the self-awareness that

the literature gradually gained.

The novel suddenly appeared at a certain moment in the history of literature. Before that there had been other forms of narrative prose, more or less complicated, but generally pure fiction: fairy tales, epics, histories. In the novel the narrative significantly grew, became psychological, then came to include philosophical and aesthetic discourses. Mann, Proust, Joyce, and Beckett began exploding its formulae in this way, and the greatest evolution mainly takes place in the twentieth century. But the seed was already planted, occasional examples cropped up in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, and later too. In his most radical novel Joyce was inspired by *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* from the nineteenth century and its remarkable language experiments.

P.: You mentioned that your destination, where *The Book of a Life* ends, is Beckett. You have the radical aim of going a step further than Beckett...

R.: Samuel Beckett reduced the prose form to an extreme, in a very conscious way. The protagonist, the narrator, and man as such he limited as far as possible to the mind imagining the story; his only activity was being the narrator. He remained, however, a kind of person, a subject. Later, there was no one who went further than Beckett,



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or if so, only in poetry or short forms. You could only go further by abandoning the human subject and giving the text subjectivity. That was really the end. At the same time, all discourse vanishes, a novel or tale is no longer possible. In the context I speak of, the evolution of the novel form, or prose in general, progress ended with Beckett.

P.: We might forward the thesis that your project is at once a departure from the medium of the book and an intuition that language has ceased to be a tool of knowledge.

R.: Of course, this is tied to a devaluation of language as a tool of knowledge and verbal communication. These books are not only a game with words, but also an expression of my cognitive crisis with language. At any rate, this happened only later, although from the beginning I felt quite remote from language, and I wanted to call language and literary forms into question, without really knowing why yet. My treatment of the language I used was becoming increasingly analytical and instrumental with every book. After *The Book of a Life* I felt that I had little left to do in terms of language, in that I had tried in working on it to draw from everything that literature had to offer. I read a great deal at the time, I simply didn't want to miss anything important. At any rate, reading greatly inspired me at the time, it was my whole world. When I finished *The*

Aby przywołać tych niespiesznych stroicieli do porządku, zerwał się i

o b i e
o c a ł g
a ę ą ł
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Ale ponieważ

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The Book of a Life

Book I took exactly the reverse approach, I wanted to cut all references to literature, even to reality. The expression of this was the last, untitled book, which seeks its name in every sentence, in its every word. The title is the name for the whole, but here that element is missing; the text keeps trying to define itself, to find its identity, to figure out what it is. This is its whole cosmos, its whole cosmology, which it cannot leave one iota.

P.: You spoke of the universality of literature. Isn't the decision to publish *The Book of a Life*, which relates everything that has happened in the history and development of writing, purely a postmodern gesture of doubting the great narratives?

R.: It less relates than allusively suggests through its form, but this doubt reveals itself and becomes visible, on the one hand, in the universality found in the work, and on the other, in its fragmentary and episodic nature. In general the book is a kind of tombstone for literature.

P.: Your doubts of the self-sufficiency of literature are visible in the first book of *Compositions*, composed of short forms, each of which can be read like an ordinary story, though it has a musical construction as well. This means that if you have knowledge of music you can read these texts quite differently.

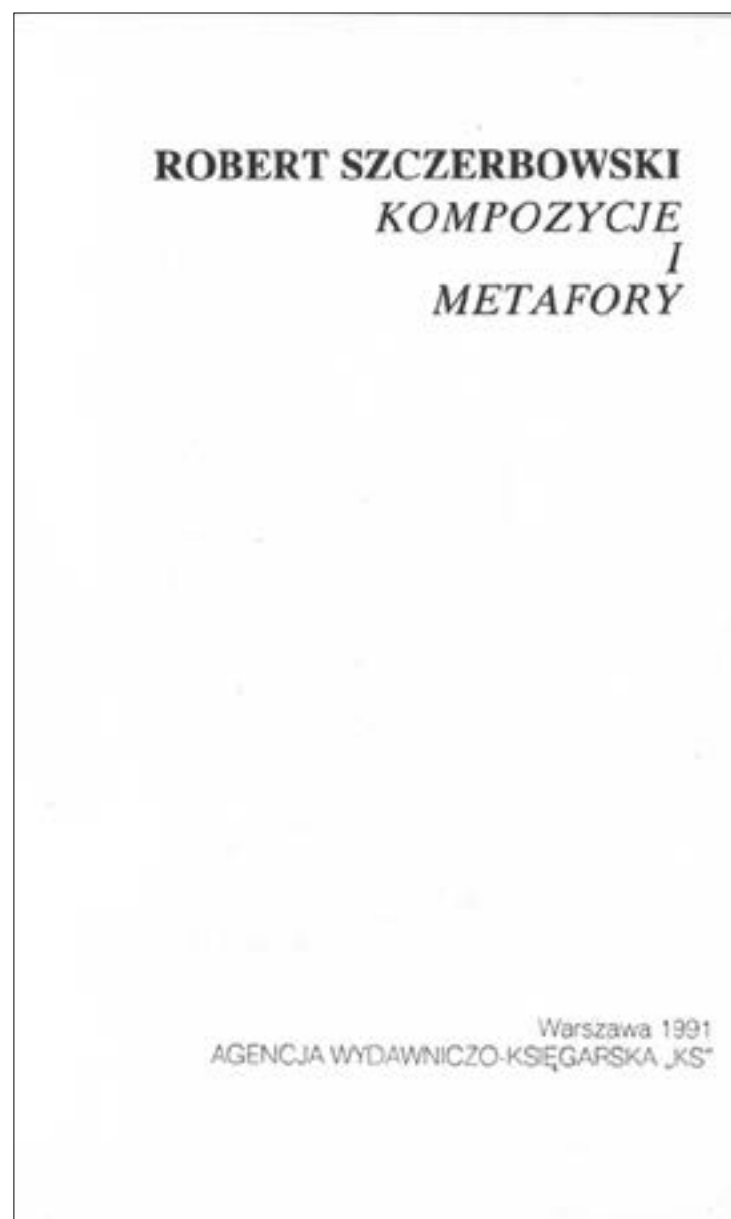
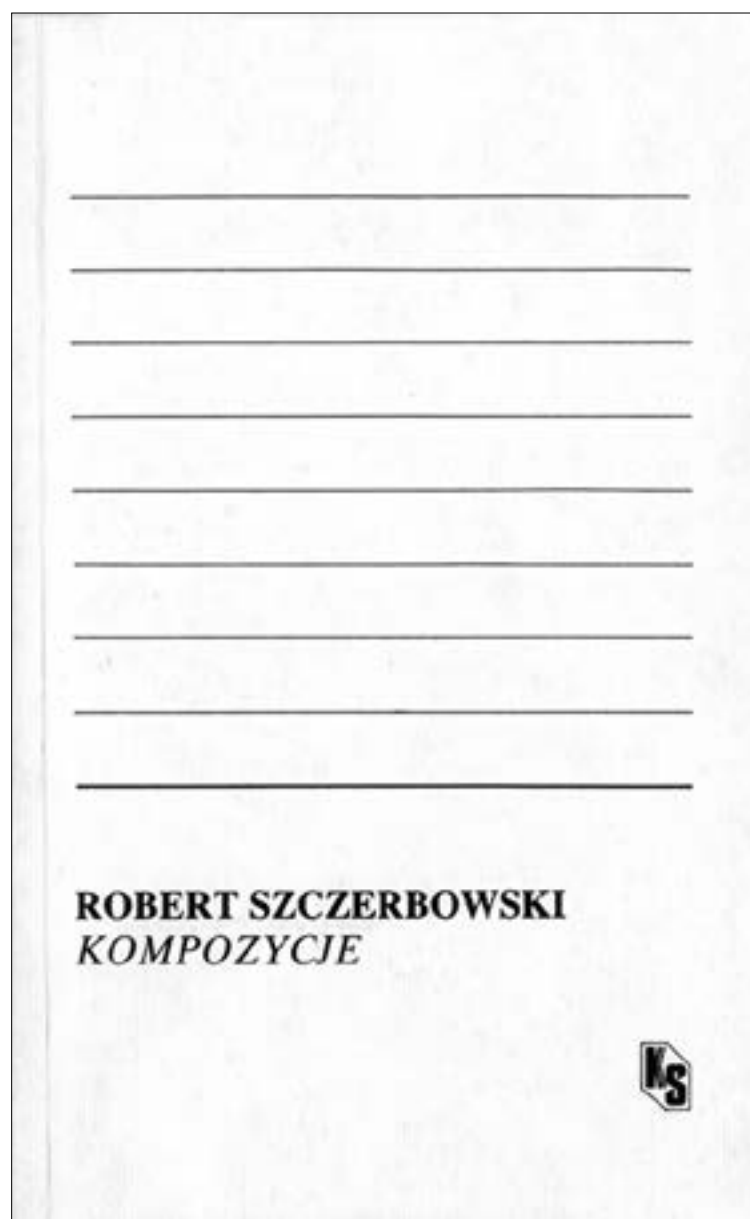
R.: You don't really need in-depth knowledge of music to read them. Usually I alluded to basic structures based on simple principles, and it suffices to read their definitions in a dictionary and to see how the stories are modeled on them. Sometimes I took a fairly liberal approach...

P.: So when you set the first words to paper you didn't entirely believe in literature. Another medium appeared at once – music.

R.: I would rather say that one-dimensional literature was not enough for me. Music was always an important part of my life and here I wanted to include it in my work.

P.: I showed your *Anthology* to a person who dismisses postmodern intuitions. The comment I received was: "Self-referentiality. The author has nothing to say"...

R.: It all depends on how a thing is presented. I understand this intuition, though in terms of the *Anthology*, the verdict is somewhat hasty. At first glance, self-referentiality appears to be a hollow construction that consumes its own contents. It can be either a technique (as in meditation, for example) or a metaphor. In art this is an expression of its self-consciousness, I believe. This motif is encountered very frequently in the past decades. I believe this is the final stage in its evolution. Not everyone agrees here, there are still (and maybe always will be) writers who



Compositions

prefer stories, or just writing about the world they live in, but this doesn't change the fact that the genre is at a standstill. It's as if you rejected the sense of meditating, which involves contemplating the mind itself: it's still a kind of experience that leads to something. Not everyone would want to live that way every day, however.

P.: In terms of this aspect of moving toward the limits of the book and crossing beyond them, in your case we might speak of the process of moving from the medium of the book to new media. Opening up to new media genres, such as literary hypertext or machine language, is an unequivocal sign of affirmation or acceptance in your work.

R.: It would seem that there is no other way out. If I was going to do something more, I had to do it in another way, because the old ways had become impossible - at least for me. Here I have in mind all the later stages tied to the visual arts. Literature has been exhausted, which means, in my case, that I exhausted myself in literature, but I continued working, just changing territories. New media emerged, new qualities appeared in the world. In this information revolution I tried to see signs of the times and new possibilities.

P.: So you are still a writer, you're just using different media?

R.: It is not impossible that my way of thinking is closer to a writer's than to an artist's, because those are two different things, and that is how I'm sometimes apprehended.

P.: Or maybe it's an attempt to transfer a conceptual experiment over to the medium of literature. Conceptualism is fairly well described in the world of the visual arts, but applying it to literary experiments is something fairly new.

R.: People might be a bit careless with the word "conceptual." I know that my books, pictures, etc. are pigeonholed that way sometimes, but I am rather surprised at this and it is hard for me to accept, as is every kind of categorization. If my work is conceptual, so too should be the works by the OuLiPo group, Perec, Raymond Roussel, and *Finnegans Wake*. I think this is an expression of the critics' helplessness, that they are unable to see things outside of such catchphrases. I would not agree that my pictures are conceptual, I only see them as visual. I might agree that they are paradoxical, but you can't reduce them to ideas. After all, Conceptualism utterly abandoned the visual and the aesthetic. Everything can be named and put into categories, but these terms really are just linguistic fictions. Every artist is one of a kind, and does something of his own. The history of art is a gallery of artificially made frames, cut-outs of a wider reality. Such generalization is



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not justified, but clearly it's difficult to get along in describing reality without such clichés, without creating general concepts to describe unique phenomena.

P.: What is most unique about you as a writer is a very conscious process of remediation, of traveling from one medium to another. You say that *The Book of a Life* is a point of departure, a limit in the medium of the book. Afterward, you began working on an untitled book (ever since the 1980s). Are you still conceiving of it as a book or a material project, or maybe you know something about the experiments between writers and technology experts that were taking place across the ocean? And in inventing a book with no title, have you considered abandoning the traditional medium?

R.: At the beginning I was still thinking about a book project, because I still saw it in the general framework of literature, albeit radicalized and self-contradictory in its discursive message. At the time I had no notion of the things you are talking about, it was deep in the Martial Law period, we were cut off from the world, I wasn't even fully conscious how language and literary forms had been experimented with in Europe and the rest of the world.

P.: So in fact at the same moment when work was underway on this in the USA, you discovered the hypertext, or

rhizome structure?

R.: It was totally intuitive, the idea was born somewhere midway through the writing, which later became the untitled book. That was around 1987. Then I took down notes for the book which was going to come about. This took two years, maybe more. It was just notes, fragments, single sentences, and there was still no sign of the book. One night I understood that the plan I was writing down was like a nude, it was the book itself, its body. That was when I conceived its dualist nature.

P.: So at first those were slips of paper that you linked together?

R.: They were free-form notations, collected over time, like single modules that were later grouped together under headings linked to other headings. It suddenly occurred to me to structure it as a dictionary, while the other text, which came about simultaneously from the same notes, would be a point of reference for the dictionary part, as its description, and vice versa – the dictionary part will be the basis for creating the other text. There is no order for the creation of the two poles, it could all be made in any order – or simultaneously.

P.: If we were to make a physical drawing, it would be a square.

R.: Yes, each side is half of a square. When the book was printed, however, and the whole digital revolution was underway, with home computers, the Internet, virtual space etc., I saw it as evident that it really was the end of books on paper, that they would soon begin creeping onto screens. I saw this as entirely natural, and my last book, by its very nature, was ready for this. It could just as well be written and published digitally without making substantial adjustments to the text.

P.: Books that had broken with the publishing tradition had already been published, such as those in the form of a codex (B. S. Johnson, for one). Your untitled book was meant to be published without covers, author, or the name of the publishing house (i.e. all the traditional signifiers). There are covers - they don't have the usual information, but they are there. There was the option, however, of making a book without covers, one that wasn't a codex.

R.: Sure, but then the whole dualism and its expression on various levels would not have been possible. This was not about the formal gestures themselves, but a way of making the material form expand the contents of the book. And yet the fact that the texts are connected by spines locates them on two opposite poles and sets them against one another, without them being isolated or apart. If the pages

dzeniem, zatrzepotać kącikiem ust——potwierdzając, że był to——

——Cicho! — słuchajmy;

——Szszszszszszuu——

——Bez szmerów!

——Uuuuuuuua...

——Bez pomrukiwań——

——aaaaa!

——Dość wrzasków!——

——????

——Skończcież wreszcie——cicho——słuchajcie.

——i dobywając z piersi
wytatuowanej geniuszem, pod którym widniał napis:*****
** ***** ***** ,——dobywając z niej klarownego baryto-

were put loose into a box it would be less justified to give the pages even numbers and so forth... I did need some kind of structure here. Chaos is not interesting in itself. Only in a text engineered in this way can you see that the chaos has a structure, which is why I needed the form of a codex. Moreover, in this way I could make direct reference to the book and to traditional literature. I still wanted it to be literature, in the old sense of the word, albeit for the last time. But I had no idea about the experiments of the 1980s you speak of.

P.: How did you develop the concept when you thought of going beyond those traditional signifiers? No title, no covers, no protagonist...

R.: I established that from the very beginning. The point of departure was the word "anepigraph," which is a work without a title. This led to an abandonment of the other attributes of a text. I wanted to rid the literary work of all its traditional attributes, insofar as that was possible. I wanted to discard all those signifiers that defined a short story or a novel. I also decided to reject the form of their publication, though not the book as such. It has no real cover, just a kind of packaging. This means we can open the book from both sides and it has its polarity.

P.: You say "old literature, albeit for the last time," but it

seems to me that you were after something new, which would explain this departure.

R.: I didn't have the feeling that this was a new horizon, it was more of a limit... I think the term "exhausted text" even comes up somewhere, and elsewhere, "last book," but I could be mistaken.

P.: In 1996 the untitled book came out on a disk. You have not often been asked about the process of publishing the first Polish hypertext. Did you need to work with a programmer in publishing it?

R.: The help of a computer specialist was essential. I commissioned the writing of a special program that allowed both of the texts composing *Æ* to be edited on the computer. You can get to these texts straight from the start menu, which has two buttons. They have graphic symbols, just like in paper books – with the same halftone. The buttons are alongside one another, and together they form a square. With the shift in medium it was necessary to change the text, particularly in those fragments which were tied to it existing in electronic form instead of paper.

P.: So you changed the contents?

R.: Yes, mainly to fit the new surroundings.

P.: Were there any further changes? The lexias that make up the dictionary are designed to have various numbers

of symbols on a single page, joined by arrows.

R.: That is part of the book's make-up, and everything was preserved in the hypertext, with the difference that in the paper version there were arrows that appeared in older, printed dictionaries, while the electronic version has links that take us right to a given place.

P.: Looking at it from the perspective of 1996, I'm wondering how the publishing houses took your unusual proposition.

R.: I had no problems there, but the circumstances were on my side. The Center for Contemporary Arts in Warsaw ran the Pusty Obłok publishing house, which published high-profile books on paper. When I approached them with my idea of publishing an electronic book, they were very open to it, though this had never been attempted in Poland; they picked it up, though they agreed to publish it in only a very limited run of 200 copies. I think they liked the text itself, and the new format as well.

P.: As a disk in a box...

R.: Yes, the box emulated the form of a book, the codex, the semi-square. Inside were instructions how to install the program on a PC and how to navigate the texts, because there were always two of them, after all.

P.: So you needed to make a program to read it and navigate it. Can you say more about its capabilities?

R.: The program was devised by a friend of mine who works with computers, Ryszard Rogocki. After you unpack it, you have to install the file and move about in its framework, because other programs had no such capabilities.

P.: The disk was distributed in visual arts venues and art bookshops?

R.: Yes, mainly in such places. But there was also a ceremonial premiere in the big B. Prus Bookstore in Warsaw, across from the university. They gave the publication a display window all its own, where they showed the disk alongside a computer mouse and a pile of copies...

P.: Did it reach people in the literary community at all, did you get any response from them?

R.: Not at the time, only a few years later. Probably there was nothing in the press, nor any media reaction, at least I didn't see any. Earlier, when I published *The Book of a Life* (in 1990) I had an offer to go on TV to talk about the book, but I turned it down, because I wanted to keep up the impression that the book had no author.

P.: So why are you telling me about it today?

R.: It stopped being a secret after a few years; at any rate, books are different in today's context, you could almost say that they are historical.

P.: Do we know how many you sold? How many copies?

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Did people buy it at all?

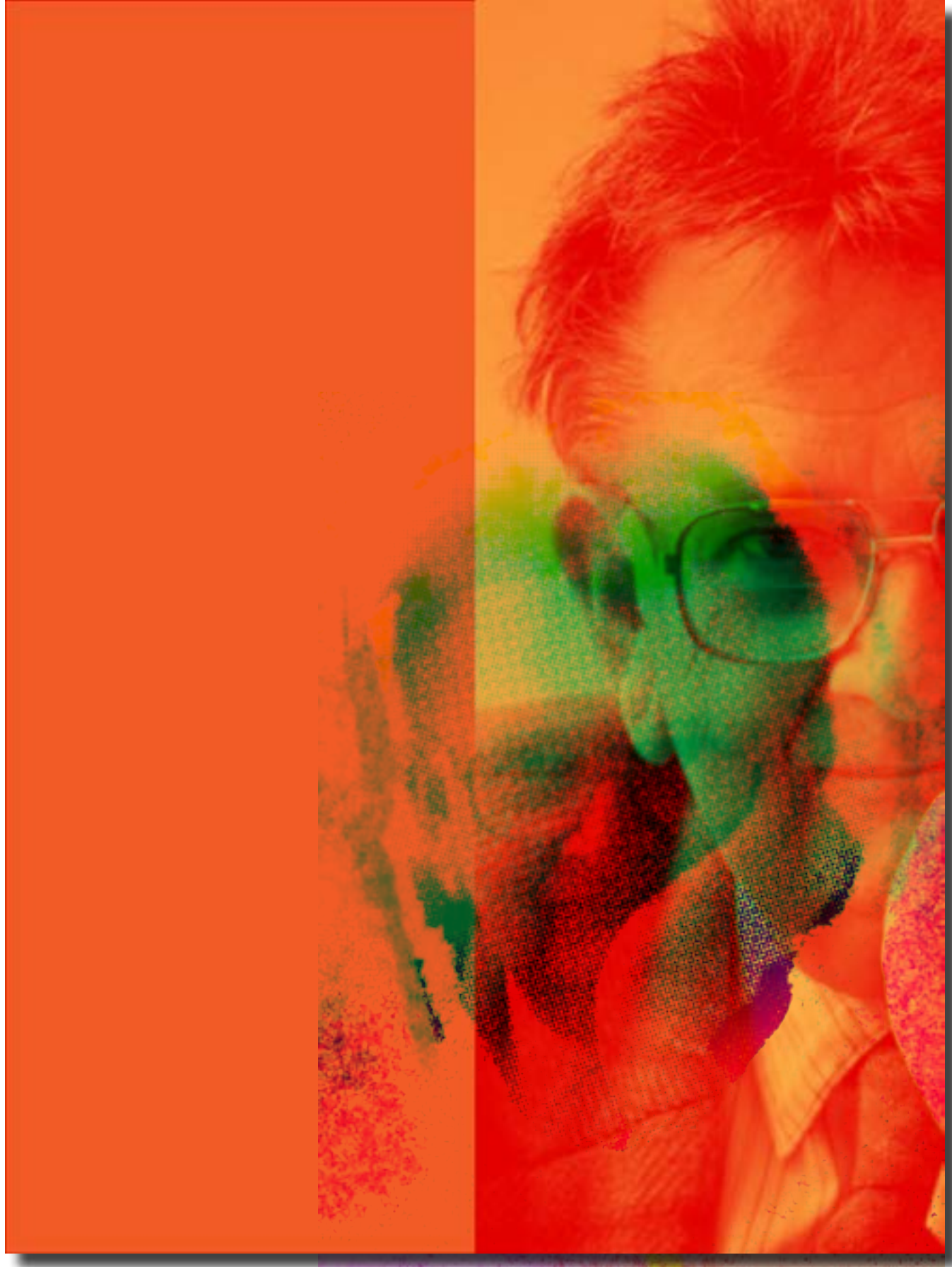
R.: Not many, less than half of that small edition got sold, and the other half was destroyed during the floods - they were being kept in the cellars of the Ujazdowski Castle, where the publishing house has its storeroom.

P.: No response? Not from a single literary critic?

R.: No one wrote about it, I think. Jan Błoński received the book edition of *Æ*, but he wasn't convinced, he couldn't find the key that held it all together, that's what he wrote me. He saw it as a collection of thoughts and aphorisms. I had already been in contact with him when I was searching for a publisher for *The Book* and someone from the *Literatura Na Świecie* journal directed me to him. He was also fairly skeptical about *The Book*, the mechanics were too complicated for him. He advised me to write something more accessible first, giving me the example of Gombrowicz and his early stories.

P.: When you wrote the untitled book in the 1980s, were you already convinced that this would be your last book? You must have been in an unusual state of mind, you wrote - and also you were in the middle of writing three books, none of which were published. They were all first released in the 1990s.

R.: In those days, if something was going to be published



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and his early stories.**

at all, the waiting period was very long, several years. Everyone was accustomed to this, or was patient, at any rate. Books were published one at a time, not simultaneously. After the third book I felt as though I had painted myself into a corner language-wise, but I kept trying to think what could be next. Even before I decided to change *Æ* to a digital format, I had planned a palimpsest of sorts, it was meant to be written on the Internet and in a purely digital form. But this fizzled fairly quickly, and I abandoned the idea.

P.: What year was that, more or less?

R.: Around 1990. I began working on it back on an Atari computer. Information reached me that someone had begun a work on the Internet and that anyone could contribute to, a collective work of sorts. This struck me as interesting, because in essence *The Book of a Life* was intended to be something similar. At any rate, I kept coming back to the same thing, but ultimately I could not reconcile myself to the thought that many people really would write it.

P.: What direction was the idea headed in? Imitating other writers' styles?

R.: Oh no, you can't step twice into the same river. It was something even more abstract than the untitled book. But that was only the idea and, as can happen at the very



beginning, it was not entirely crystallized. My book concepts have never been set from the outset, they emerge during the making. Then I change the earlier stages to fit the concept as it evolves. I have always been interested in overlaying old content with new things, reworking my own material, layering my work.

P.: In a way we might speak of various forms of the untitled book: an audio version, a shredded version...

R.: That was just when I began doing new things, on the verge of language and the visual, with different media. Those were projects that created various links in a chain, one of which was a copy of the book sliced up in a paper shredder. This seemed the best test for abandoning language and moving into the sphere of objects. It was in the mid 1990s, when I felt more intensely that visual communication was

beginning to dominate linguistic communication in our culture. The culture of images, as it was called then, was increasingly at the forefront.

P.: There is one page in the untitled book in which you superimpose all the dictionary entries. The page is unreadable.

R.: That was my first experiment with simultaneity, which I later used as one of my techniques. And it was my first effacement of the message, and at the same time, a new and important aspect of that shredded book in a bag was that it integrated and mixed those two previously opposed texts, making them single and undifferentiated.

P.: The second integration or mixing involved destroying one thousand copies of the untitled book.


R.: That was a similar gesture, but on a larger scale; it was a thousand copies in the form of a package. But it was also something different, in that it was done in the printing house, which first printed the books, then destroyed them.

P.: The next stage in abandoning the material form was making the audio version...

R.: That was my interpretation of those two texts. I read them and then prepared them in such a way that the verbal message was significantly eliminated.

P.: You put that version on a CD packaged in a black cube.

R.: I wanted an unconventional kind of packaging, something



robert szczerbowski
anepigraf i egzegeza

z cyklu Pisma hermetyczne
Tom 4

Hieratic Press

that would conceal it, and not only protect it. The result was the black cube, bound in canvas like a book. Every side of the cube has an identical hole in the middle, and if we look through those holes, we see right through it, as if there were nothing inside. But when we open the box it turns out there is a disk inside, set at a 45-degree angle on two sides, so that the eye is fooled - it looks through the hole and we think there's nothing there.

P.: Your lecture entitled *Art as a Simulacrum Performed by 4 Lecturers* was very similar in intent to the audio version of the untitled book...

R.: Yes, there the voices also overlapped, making the text practically incomprehensible. A film was made of the performance, where the screen was divided into four equal parts. Each of those screen had a presenter reading the same text, only in a different configuration.

P.: Your later work with text and literature involved experiments with "machine language."

R.: That is a language used by computer programmers to talk to a machine, or to give it a working environment. The computer can calculate, but it would be unable to do anything without this language. The program has a range of instructions that build sequences of higher-order codes, thus allowing it to carry out concrete tasks. We have to



recall that no one understands this language directly, because it is not a language we use to communicate as people. It is a shorthand language, because the real language the computer, or its processor, to be exact, uses to function is sequences of zeroes and ones so long that, for the sake of convenience, we use whole groups of them as ready-made modules - and this is the essence of machine language.

P.: You have translated very traditional texts, such as the Torah, into machine language.

R.: That again was a kind of epiphany, when for the umpteenth time an old computer froze and the screen showed some incomprehensible DOS symbols. To me it looked like some kind of ancient language. I began thinking it over and I realized that this machine language was a real tongue, the newest one to be created on Earth, one that serves to

communicate - not between people, but between people and machines, and vice versa. Moreover, it very unique, and a great breakthrough in our civilization that something of this sort exists, that a new sort of being has come about: a machine with which we have begun to speak, and which we have harnessed to an entirely new way of functioning. Several of my works tie the latest technologies with the oldest ones, from the origins of writing. Machine writing on clay tablets was an example of this sort of artifact, as was the Torah.

P.: In terms of text media clay tablets and machine writing are the furthest extremes imaginable.

R.: I was thinking about this in the context of a breakthrough in civilization, when we ally ourselves with an utterly new world of beings created by our technology, producing a new and different metaphysics in the future. I also wanted to confront this with tradition that has been part of the discipline, the oldest and most classical, like the Torah, which is in the form of scrolls, very much like computer print-outs. And the signs of machine language are also like hieroglyphics to me. I just dreamed it one day: scrolls of a book in an incomprehensible language. On the other hand, in the clay tablets with pressed inscriptions in machine language you have the whole history of

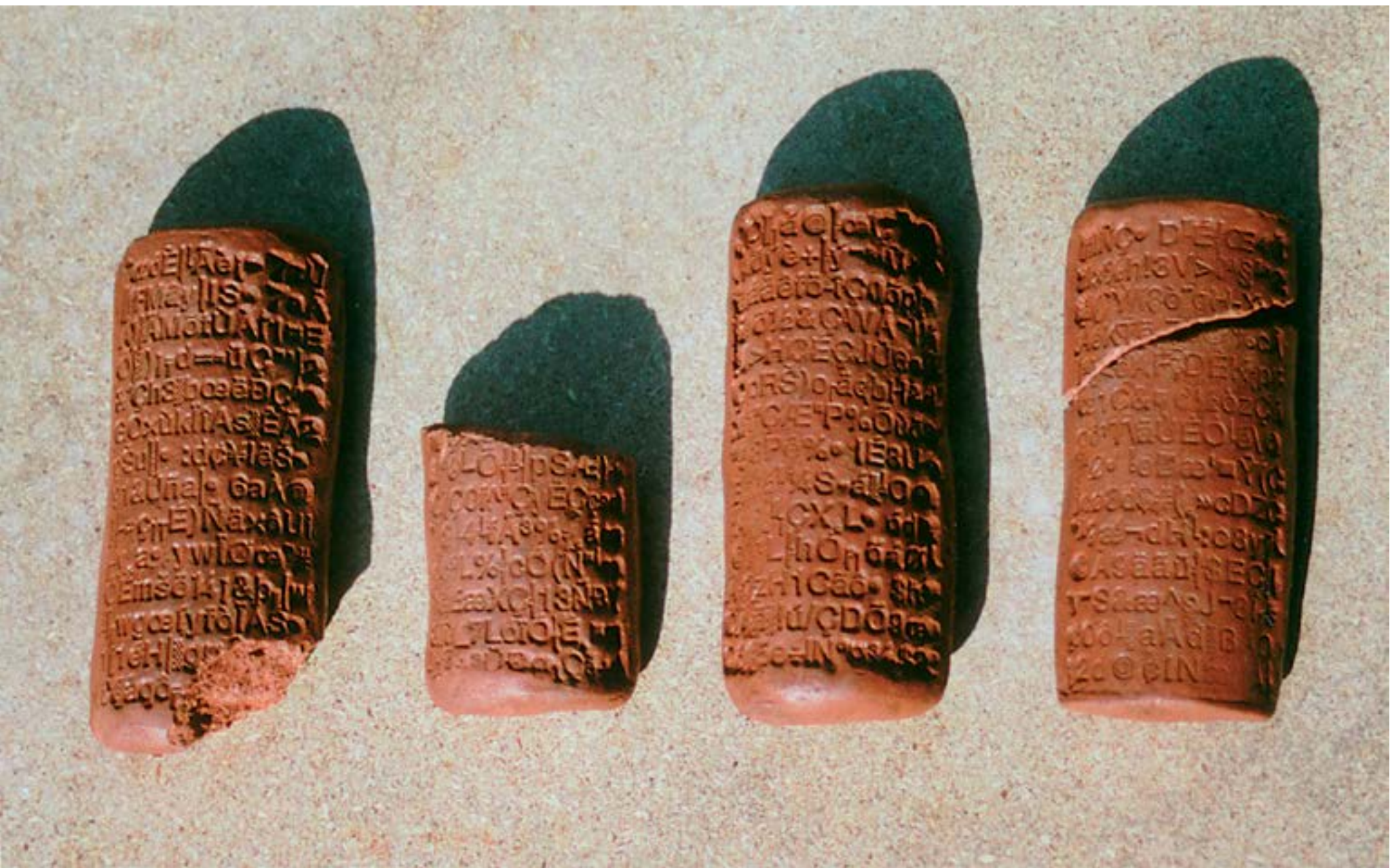
civilization from Mesopotamian times to the Silicon Era. In my work from that period, machine language was still a language, true, but with no verbal message, it had a different significance: it confronted the viewer with the impossibility of reading the content. Later, I increasingly abandoned thinking of the language of symbols, finally coming across fractal geometry, or fractals, which can, in fact, only exist in a computer. Primitive fractals were created one hundred years ago on paper, but it was only with the calculating power of the computer that it was possible to visualize whole families of particular patterns. Fractals are a purely mathematical field with very practical applications in the sciences, in meteorology, in physics, but I was interested in them as a motif in art. What fascinates me most in fractals is that they are a combination of order and chaos, that you can penetrate into their depths, endlessly. You can enlarge a tiny fragment to fill the screen, and then you are in another, deeper layer of the fractal, and so on, to infinity. I decided to use them in a series of pictures, which I call fractal images or cybercanvases. They seemed remarkably attractive as a subject for painting.

P.: Why that medium, traditional painting?

R.: I was sorely tempted to see those forms, which no man could, perhaps, have invented, on canvas, in a large format,



Glass Tablets



Machine writing on clay tablets

for the sheer pleasure of seeing them. I also thought it might be interesting in that painting generally pertains to reality, unless it is abstract, while here we have a reference to a new sort of being - virtual reality. I wanted to summon it from that space and materialize it to be as real as possible. This also involved reflecting upon the idea that new media encourage us to take the easy route. In art and creativity work and effort are increasingly on the wane; computers, and machines in general, do everything for us.

P.: Later you began exploring the medium of film and stretching it to its limits, much as you had books.

R.: Film suggested itself naturally, as an extension of the fractal pictures. They were stimulated by pixels, which do not exist in the computer definition of the fractal, because the pixel is an imperfection of the screen. But this struck me as quite painterly and was an allusion to abstract painting. And when I finished this series of cybercanvases, I thought that it would be interesting to make pixels move. In certain fractal-generating programs you can set fractals in motion through a sequence of changing colors. And then you have the impression that the fractals flow, move, pulse. This experiment led to making a short film with pixels that move about, but in an utterly uncoordinated and accidental way. It is as though we were watching an



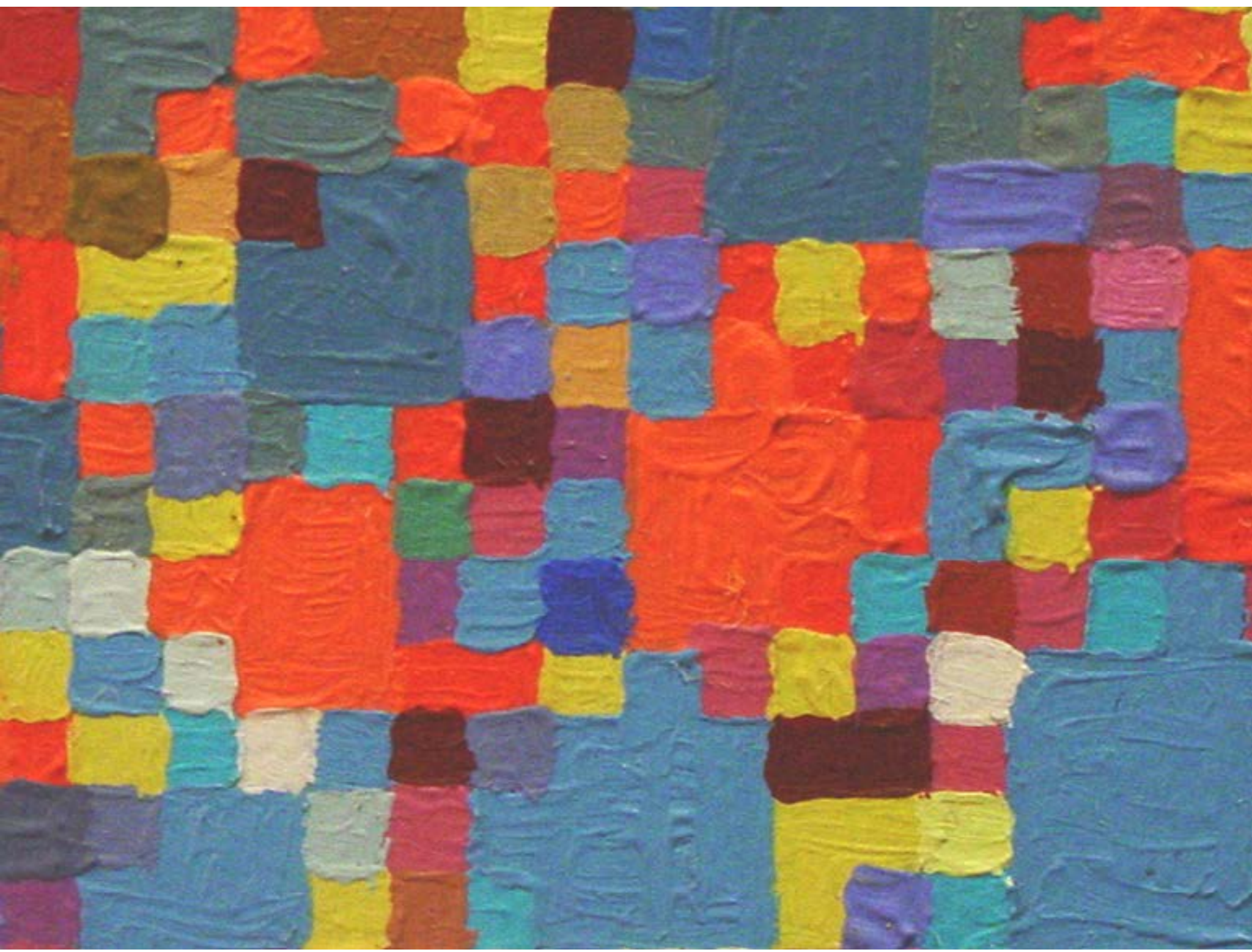
What fascinates me most in fractals is that they are a combination of order and chaos, that you can penetrate into their depths, endlessly.

abstract picture made of squares of various shades and contents, and inside each square all those elements keep changing. Then other ideas came about; they involved dividing the screen into smaller sections, and the sections themselves became small screens, whose contents were no longer abstract. They were filled with films.

P.: All the media in your work has been taken to the outer limits. Starting with music, in the first collection of short stories, to books and literature, visual art, and film. I wonder: Is this not an aim in itself?

R.: It looked different from my perspective. The shift in territories came about more from the need to delve, to expand my capabilities while maintaining the same strategies - more or less. If I did not find the path on the foundation I was using, I kept searching. I did not aim to exhaust any medium, it was more like I exhausted myself within it. It is true that I was interested in investigating its limits, finding its principles, transcending its definitions. I was never interested in destruction as such. A literary runs through through various pieces of mine, as do musical qualities. One example might be the audio version of the untitled book; the sound in the films is also of major importance. In the canvases, in turn, I wanted to make a series of pictures derived from virtual space, more to

expand its definition than to exhaust it. When I created this series I lost interest in painting, in all of it. I was after a certain kind of synthesis in what I did for many years. We are living in times which, on the one hand, give us a sense of decline, of massive breakthrough and reevaluation, and on the other hand, we see the beginning of an utterly new chapter in the development of civilization, the results of which remain to be seen. This can sometimes give us concern for the future of humanist values.





Robert Szczerbowski – is a Polish writer and artist. He studied philosophy in Poznań and in Warsaw. He initially wrote, then gradually moved away from the sphere of language, increasingly using visual media in his work. His "literary" work is, to some degree, conceptual, and could be perceived as a series of reflections on the meaning of writing and books as such. This chapbook accompanies the publication of *The Anthology* of Robert Szczerbowski in Korporacja Ha!art's Liberature Series for 2013.



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